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Review of Bambi Schieffelin, Kathryn Woolard, and Paul Kroskrity,
Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory

Abstract

This volume collects a set of papers on language ideology that were first presented in 1991 at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting. I attended that conference symposium, and I recall an atmosphere of excitement and intellectual discovery. The presenters and much of the audience felt that the concept of language ideology was just beginning to open up important new areas for research on language and society, and we were impressed by the rich, diverse presentations that clarified and extended the concept.

Comments

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SCHIEFFELIN, BAMBI, WOOLARD, KATHRYN & KROSKRITY, PAUL. Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 338 + xiii pp.

This volume collects a set of papers on language ideology that were first presented in 1991 at the American Anthropological Association annual meeting. I attended that conference symposium, and I recall an atmosphere of excitement and intellectual discovery. The presenters and much of the audience felt that the concept of language ideology was just beginning to open up important new areas for research on language and society, and we were impressed by the rich, diverse presentations that clarified and extended the concept.

Over the course of the intervening decade, our optimism about research on language ideology has proven justified. Work on language ideology has burgeoned, and the concept continues to illuminate theoretical issues and empirical phenomena in anthropology and neighboring disciplines (cf. the collections and references in Gal & Woolard, 1995; Kroskrity, in press; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This new volume—which contains revised and updated papers by presenters at the original conference symposium—is a useful collection of the best work being done on the topic. Contributors describe productive empirical work being done in a vast range of societies and on institutional processes ranging from legal education to media discourse to language revitalization to national language policy.

In her introduction to the volume, Kathryn Woolard defines language ideology as “representations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world (p.3).” As Woolard and Susan Gal both note, this concept subsumes several lines of inquiry that were formerly considered distinct. Gal summarizes these in her closing commentary on the volume:

Linguists and philosophers of language have pondered the...fact that ordinary language is always and unavoidably its own metalanguage. Many...have noted that, to understand interaction, one has to have cultural categories for “what is going on,” and what can possibly be going on, in any strip of talk. Scholars of multilingualism and language contact...have understood that choice of a language has political implications exactly because of speakers’ commonsense convictions

about what...the use of a language is assumed to imply about political loyalty and identity. And historians of ideas have noted the important influence that linguistic theories and social movements have often had on each other. (p.317)

From this list of rich topics, we can see the daunting task faced by the contributors to this volume. If they can indeed illuminate all these issues with the single concept of language ideology, they will have done important scientific work. But it will be a challenge to make one concept do all this.

At first, the volume seems to divide its attention between two different senses of language ideology. First, language ideologies are belief systems shared by members of a group—ones that apply to language. People might believe, for instance, that a particular dialect “lacks grammar” and thus cannot be used to express complex ideas. Second, language ideologies are the often-implicit construals that speakers make of particular, contextualized instances of discourse. Any utterance makes sense only as it gets (metapragmatically) construed as an instance of some recognizable type of social action. The first sense of linguistic ideology describes a more “macro-level” social process, while the second describes a more “micro-level” one.

Instead of being a problem, however, the relevance of “language ideology” to both macro and micro levels turns out to be a strength. Language ideologies have particular power as an analytic tool because they *both* contribute to larger social belief systems *and* allow individuals to construe particular instances of discourse. Widely shared ideologies about language do in fact predispose speakers to interpret particular instances of discourse in certain ways. At the same time, contingent social interactions are the empirical location in which broader theories exist and get transformed. So language ideologies are pivotal for the dialectical relation between contingent verbal practice and larger social facts. Furthermore, as documented by most of the contributors, ideologies about language are tied to ideologies about social identity, nationalism and other important social concepts. So studies of language ideology can also open up “the social-historical processes that link face-to-face communities to national and transnational spheres” (p. vi).

Like any ambitious work, the volume does leave open several important questions. It does not fully overcome the macro-micro split. This chasm is too large to

be filled by one volume, and the essays in this volume lean toward the macro. But the contributors do make a convincing argument that the concept of language ideology can help us work toward bridging macro and micro. The volume also raises, but does not resolve, the theoretical dispute indexed by the term “ideology.” Are most folk theories about language serving the interests of dominant groups, or are they merely simplistic—but not necessarily insidious—beliefs? Contributors come down on both sides of this issue. More work needs to be done, to determine whether the question could be answered empirically or whether we confront here two divergent scientific and political agendas. Finally, the volume only begins to raise the question of reflexivity: on what grounds do we as analysts of social life judge native theories to be “ideologies?” Jim Collins begins to open up this question in his contribution, but more work needs to be done here as well.

That these three open issues remain is more a compliment than a criticism of the book, however. The editors present the volume as a snapshot of ongoing empirical work and theoretical discussions, and this snapshot usefully opens up promising areas of inquiry for the study of language and social life.

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